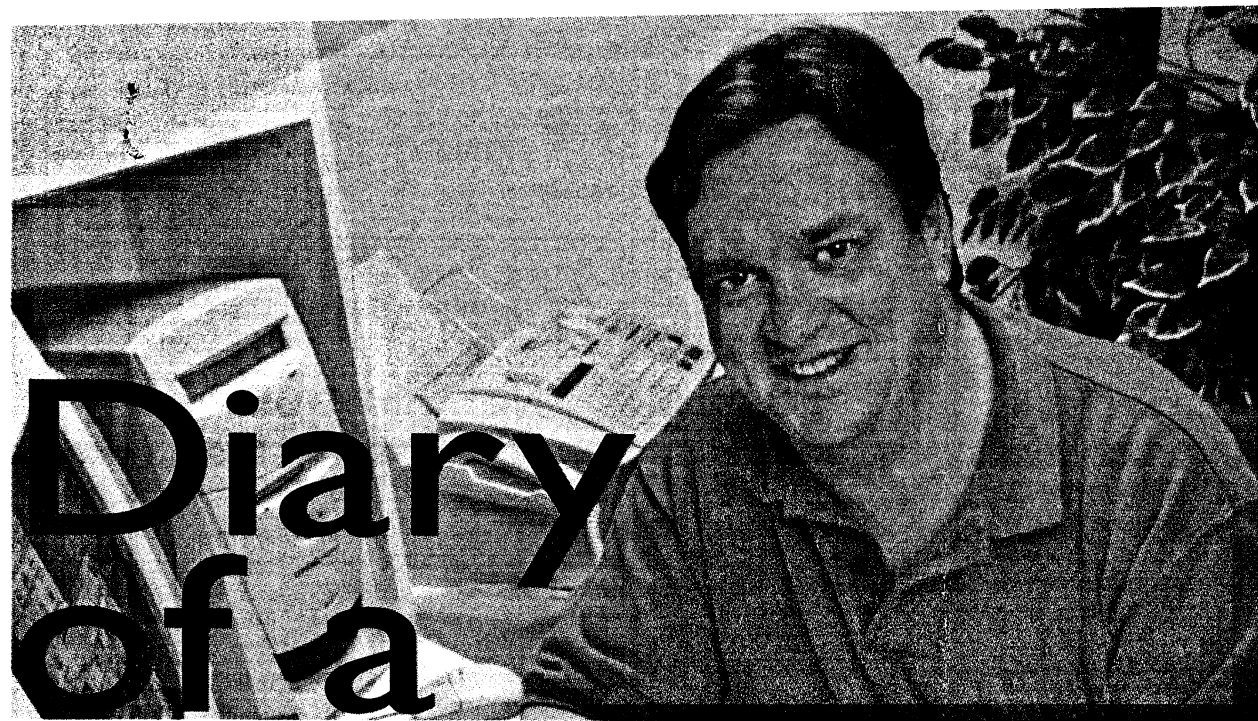




Diary of a home-office worker

By **JIM CARROLL**

I'm typing this early in the day that Toronto was shut down by the "Winter Storm of '99" and have quickly realized one of the realities of working out of a home office—there is no such thing as a "snow day."

That's not a bad thing, particularly if you love your job, as I do. I've been working out of a home office since 1990, and in some ways, I like to think that I have gone on strike against the excesses of the corporate world. There is no bureaucracy, no threat of downsizing or "rightsizing." The only person that might re-engineer me out of a job is me.

I don't waste time in traffic, find myself in endless meetings, or fret about the latest office rumour. Like many individuals who work out of their home, I relish the freedom that it provides, and revel in the fact that I am firmly in charge of my career and my life.

The daily grind

My typical morning commute is from the upstairs to the downstairs. Usually arising at 5:30 or 6:00 AM, I spend a half-hour working away on my exercise bike while reading various morning newspapers on the Internet. Then I hit the office, a spacious room that we added on to our home a few years ago when undertaking a major addition.

I usually work until about 5 PM, which adds up to a very productive nine- or ten-

hour day. I can then immediately spend some time with my wife and kids, which is, to me, the ultimate benefit of working at home.

Living a life where your office is but a few steps away might not be for everyone, particularly given that it can be a rather lonely experience at first. I had spent 12 years working in some fairly large-scale offices, and had become rather accustomed to office chit-chat, and clearly missed the social interaction. Yet I soon found that spending a few minutes chatting with a neighbor about their garden, or taking a quick dip in the pool, was far more satisfying than learning about the latest in workplace politics.

And indeed, my situation changed dramatically when, in 1995, my wife quit her job as financial comptroller for a billion-dollar organization, and joined me in the home office. We've been working together ever since, a fact which astonishes some people. I wonder why it is that some people can't understand that you can love someone at the same time as they manage you.

Technology has become the focal point of my home-office environment. At this point, I have some nine or ten computers around the house, a mixture of Windows, Macintosh, and Linux systems, linked together through a local network that extends to every room in the house. This permits me the flexibility of making my entire home my working quarters. Even though I have a fabulous separate office in my home, I'll often take my IBM Thinkpad

laptop and locate myself out on the back deck or in a big comfy chair in the basement when writing one of my various books. The ability to relocate the "home office" anywhere in the house has certainly proven to be valuable when it comes to productivity and creativity.

No escape

The only real problem I have discovered in the last nine years is that it can be quite difficult to separate my personal life from my work. With the office but a few feet away, it is always a challenge to tune out the voice-mail light flashing on my office telephone, signifying a call from a potential new client, or faxes that arrive in the middle of the night, interrupting sleep. E-mail is but a mouse click away, tempting me with its message.

The siren call of the home office beckons, making it difficult to achieve real down time.

The result? Rather than offering freedom, I learned early on that the home office led to overwork. I have had to struggle to maintain balance.

My solution? Something decidedly low tech: a solid oak door. Not inexpensive, the \$300 investment provides wonderful soundproofing, keeping the interruptions of the home office away from my personal life. I'm learning to firmly and resolutely close the door every day with a "thunk," signaling that my work day is over.

Sometimes the best solutions have nothing whatsoever to do with technology.

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